DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 228 EA 013 888

AUTHOR Scheirer, Elinor A.
TITLE Sociological Bases of Informal Education: An Ethnographic Study of an Informal Middle School in England.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Philadelphia, PA, March 13, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Observation Techniques; Discovery Learning; Foreign Countries; Individualized Instruction; Intermediate Grades; *Middle Schools; *Nontraditional Education; Open Education; School Schedules; Staff Development; Student Teacher Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *England; Infant Schools (United Kingdom); *Informal Education

ABSTRACT

To examine the cultural context and theoretical basis of an educational system similar to the British infant school approach, this study undertook observation and analysis of a British middle school practicing what is called "informal education" (to differentiate it from other similar innovations such as open education, individualized instruction, or learning centers). Data were collected through six months of observation of school activities. Observations suggest that crucial to the functioning of the system is the fact that all the teachers relate to all the students, rather than only to those in their classes. The pattern of the school day (workshops, school assembly, playtime, lunch, voluntary activities, mathematics, reading and special topics, and story time) supports such interaction, as well as supporting staff interaction. Staff interactions provide an informal type of inservice training. Formal staff development activities include visits to other schools and faculty meeting discussions. Since the head of the school has considerable influence over the selection of new teachers, most on the staff share similar views regarding teaching and learning. This study is intended to have implications for schools in the United States that have objectives similar to those of British schools using informal educational approaches. (Author/JM)

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Sociological Bases of Informal Education: An Ethnographic Study of an Informal Middle School in England

Elinor A. Scheirer
University of North Florida
Jacksonville, Florida

Paper Presentation
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Annual Meeting
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Elinor A. Scheirer
University of North Florida
Jacksonville, Florida

During the 1960's, American educators became keenly aware of certain educational patterns which were enjoying success in the state-supported infant schools and junior schools in England. Reports by Featherstone (1971) and Silberman (1970) described not only the nature of the educational practices being used but also documented attempts in this country to implement these practices and to adapt them to American settings. A movement had been born in American education which subsequently was variously labeled the "open classroom," "open education," or the "British Infant School approach." (See, for example, Kohl, 1969; Stephens, 1974; Weber, 1971.)

As these practices gained wider publicity and philosophical support in the United States, many groups of American elementary-school teachers and administrators traveled to England during the summers to observe first-hand what was going on in these English schools and to obtain a common frame of reference for curriculum changes which they would be making in their elementary schools back home. They generally traveled to several local education

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authorities in England known to demonstrate excellent examples of these methods; they observed how several schools in each of these authorities implemented the ideas associated with the "British Infant School."

During the past ten years the concept of the "open classroom" has in some respects been modified to include efforts at "individualizing instruction" (Charles, 1976; Dunn & Dunn, 1972), "personalizing instruction," utilizing "learning centers" (Davidson, Fountain, Grogan, Short, & Steely, 1976), or, more recently, "teaching students through their individual learning styles" (Dunn & Dunn, 1978). This modification perhaps reflects the Americanizing of a way of looking at children and the process of educating them so as to be responsive to the demands placed on American teachers and administrators. The conventional wisdom of the field, however, consistently acknowledged that the theoretical base for much of what was advocated lay in the teaching methods associated with the British Infant School model. It is possible, then, to characterize some of these developments in elementary education as adaptation of an idea while still acknowledging its theoretical lineage.

Several problems associated with the implementation of the British Infant School model in the United States have motivated the study described in this paper. First, efforts at importing the model were often simply a transporting of selected techniques and individual practices from one environment to another. The cultural context and broad educational milieu in which the school practices arose in England were often overlooked by the American educators

during their hurried trips through the infant schools they visited.

Secondly, the rapid proliferation of these techniques and practices throughout the United States resulted in situations where teachers were implementing teaching methods that were acquired second-hand with little or no personal understanding of the complex variables which supported those methods in England. The methods were often labeled as being "British Infant School" while being two and three times removed from the original concept.

Thirdly, much of the discussion in American educational circles of the British Infant School approach implies that the practices today are little different than they were in 1970 or even in 1965. Educational philosophy and the development of methodology, however, are not more static in Britain than they are in the United States. If we are to continue to acknowledge this approach to elementary education as "British Infant School," we also have the obligation to keep informed regarding current educational thinking and practice in Britain.

A fourth motivation for this study arose out of the fact that the American experience with the British Infant School approach and its variants has met with mixed success. Discussion of the successes and failures of these attempts has raised questions about the theoretical soundness of the concept itself and the conditions which might be necessary if it is to be successfully transported from British into American schools. There is a need for in-depth study of such a British educational setting so that the theoretical base and cultural context can be clearly communicated to those who will use its methodology in the United States and so that the con-

ditions necessary for successful implementation can be identified.

The specific purpose of this observation-participation study was to observe and analyze a system of "informal education" as practiced in one state-supported middle school in South Yorkshire, England. For clarity and to avoid association with the techniques and activities of other, often different, educational innovations, the term "informal education" was used to designate the general nature of the educational methodology of the school studied.

The focus was principally upon the underlying patterns of: school organization; the implementing of philosophical views regarding education; and in-service staff training. The research sought to identify factors affecting the success of informal education in this environment which might be applied in situations in the United States.

Setting

During the academic year of 1979-1980, a six-month observation-participation study was undertaken in one state-supported middle school which is identified by British educators as a positive example of the implementation of informal teaching approaches. The modern school serves approximately two hundred sixty students, eight to thirteen years of age, drawn from a "catchment area" of working-class and some middle-class people. Roseland Middle School is part of the Doncaster Local Education Authority of South Yorkshire, England; it is located in a smaller community within the heavily industrial city of Doncaster.

The staff included nine full-time teachers, four men and five women, two part-time teachers, both female, one head teacher,

male, a school secretary, and several visiting teachers in specialized content areas. Except for one first-year teacher, all the faculty had more than five years of teaching experience, four with more than ten years.

The school is organized into four "years" which correspond to the four main age groups in the school. Classroom instruction is mainly self-contained, although teachers coordinate their work so that similar content is typically explored in all the classes at the same age level. The head teacher instructs a fourth year mathematics class and monitors work in the activity area, in addition to functioning as the administrator for the school; he also frequently assumes instructional responsibilities when teachers are absent due to illness or visits to other schools.

Much of the instruction is based upon the experiences of students on field trips taken in the local area for a morning or afternoon, or sometimes taken over a two to six-day period in a more distant location. The instructional themes thus vary with these new experiences and generally change every five-week period or "half-term."

The typical school day begins with "workshop," a period of time in which students explore materials and work from the observation of natural and man-made phenomena to the expression of their reactions in paint, pen and ink, pencil, clay, writing, music, or oral presentations. While all the students may be presented with the same stimuli, their responses vary according to the media used and the individual's own expression. Before the morning playtime and coffee break, a daily school-wide assembly is held in the hall;

here all students and staff share experiences, from singing songs to class presentations. During the morning play, the teachers gather in the staff room for coffee, while one of them supervises the children playing. Workshop continues after play until dinnertime when a hot meal is served family-style to the teachers and students in their classrooms. An hour break follows in which the children play or voluntarily participate in noontime activities offered by the teachers with talents in specific areas. The afternoon session begins with mathematics; during the playtime break the teachers gather in the staff room for tea while one of their number again supervises the children outside. The last segment of the day includes a quiet reading time, special topics, and an opportunity to finish work begun earlier in the day. The day ends with the teacher reading a story to the class for ten to fifteen minutes.

Methodology

The researcher functioned as a type of resource teacher in the school who had few institutional responsibilities, but who had freedom of access to interact with the subjects, both students and teachers, as desired. The researcher was thus the observer and the participant, although data were regularly discussed with the on-site participants for confirmation and clarification. Frequently, however, the researcher had to adjust her role and modify her activities in keeping with her status as not only a visitor in the school, but also a visitor from another country. While in the beginning the school staff did not have a clear comprehension of

the rationale for the study or its design, they gradually came to understand that the research was positively motivated and thus came to provide the informal support so necessary if observation-participation work is to be successful. This trust and growing professional interest in the work has been invaluable.

This observation-participation study owes much of its conceptual basis to the work of Smith and Geoffrey (1968) and Cusik (1973). The "guiding model" or "image of an end in view," as Smith (1979, pp. 330-331) describes it, was inspired by their work and a perceived need for similar effort in the field of elementary education as it attempted to incorporate ideas from another culture. The research was guided by several questions: 1) "What are the essential characteristics of British informal education?" 2) "How are the schools organized to make informal teaching possible in this setting?" 3) "What is the nature of the teaching styles which generate the specific teaching behaviors observed?" 4) "How does this particular approach to education relate to the larger social setting?" Over a six-month period spent in the school, the researcher also responded to the on-going "flow" of school life and pursued involvement in a changing set of activities in order to obtain the broadest perspective possible with regard to the organization and functioning of this particular informal educational environment. Obviously, though, this presented a sampling problem of assuring that all relevant domains were observed with integrity over time.

The data gathered took the form of direct observations of teacher and student behaviors within a wide range of educational activities related to the program of this particular school. This

process of describing and cataloguing what was observed simultaneously included the drawing of comparisons to practices in our schools, an unavoidable consequence, perhaps, when a researcher from one cultural context operates in another. In addition to the direct data, the field records show a nearly constant stream of analytical and interpretive statements. These drew on behavioral evidence to substantiate theoretical positions advocated by the school or reflected the researcher's efforts at identifying and testing conceptual threads which helped to explain what was happening and why. There was a constant and dynamic "pull" among these kinds of data as the research progressed, with each profoundly affecting subsequent observations, analyses, and interpretations.

An aside seems appropriate here with regard to the "fit" of the methodology to the setting being studied. The British view of schooling practiced at Roseland values description and process which, in turn, supports the use of an observation-participation approach toward research rather than the use of more quantitative research methods.

Results

Through the use of the concept of triangulation, as described by Smith (1979, pp. 344-347), the qualitative data gathered was analyzed in order to identify underlying behavioral patterns which characterized this school and staff. Out of this process also came the beginnings of a theory of instruction for informal education. This paper will only discuss the behavioral patterns which emerged as crucial to the functioning of this unique system.

One cluster of behaviors seems to center on the organization of the school itself. The school population is relatively small by American standards with only two hundred sixty students. While size alone can dramatically affect the quality of teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher interaction, other practices at Roseland Middle School legitimize a way of interacting that can have a marked influence regardless of the size of the institution. All of the teachers relate to all of the students whether or not they are in their particular classes; this relationship takes the form of commenting on something the child has done that is noteworthy, discussing with him or her consequences of certain behaviors as an approach to management, or sharing an observation of something in the environment that can be turned to instructional advantage. The attention to detail that accompanies this interest in particular children and their behaviors permeates the entire school setting; it concretely reflects the view held by these British educators that we must observe children closely and then help them carefully observe their world and respond expressively to it in all of its complexity.*

The pattern of the school day also lends support to this mode of interaction. The relatively open period of workshop in the morning allows time for teachers and students to analyze tasks together and to evaluate together the work students are doing, often on a one-to-one basis. The rhythm of the daily schedule and of the school year itself, with its balance between intense intellectual activity and sanctioned informal social interaction, gives credence to the school's purposes in developing "whole"

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*One description of this approach to teaching can be found in Marsh (1970).

individuals who are not only adept at observing and thinking about their environment, but who are also comfortable and confident in relating to others within the framework of accepted values in the culture.

The school's rituals support these purposes. Children value their playtime as much as the teachers value the coffee and tea. Assemblies in the morning provide a time for "coming together" when what is learned can be shared, new ideas and experiences can be presented, and time can be enjoyed. The classroom storytime in the late afternoon provides a similar "coming together" at the end of the day which provides closure.

Dinnertime allows teachers and students to interact informally while enjoying a well-presented hot meal. The noontime activities voluntarily offered by the teachers provide further opportunities for informal interaction, as well as a broadening of the students' educational backgrounds.

The rhythm and ritual of the school day, which provide for regular interaction among staff members, lead to a staff cohesiveness. These informal gatherings inevitably result in a sharing of personal experiences with children and a discussing of the implications of those experiences with regard to the broad purposes accepted for teaching in this type of school. The informal interactions thus provide a kind of in-service training for the staff members and a socialization procedure for any new teachers at the school.

Since the head of the school has considerable influence over the selection of new teachers, most on the staff share similar views regarding teaching and learning. The practice of having only

one or two new teachers on the staff at one time allows for a deliberate, while not explicit, socialization of the new members by the more experienced ones, which also makes a team approach to the education of children more likely. This team approach is likewise apparent in the diversity of skills among the staff members; since they are hired in part based on the unique contributions they can make to the total school effort, staff members view each other cooperatively rather than competitively.

In addition, though, professional development opportunities here are explicit as well. Faculty are encouraged to visit other schools and to share their observations upon returning. At regular faculty meetings, instructional issues are discussed which relate to the effective implementation of the teaching approach supported by the school. The head teacher or other staff member chairs such discussions as evaluating children's art work, improving mathematical problem-solving, and providing children broader experiences in scientific thinking. The intellectual thrust of these meetings reflects a pervasive dedication to observing what children do and to thinking about what they can do. The head teacher informally but systematically encourages this process at other times by raising questions he has been pondering and sharing observations he has made; others on the staff quite naturally do likewise, either intentionally or not.

Implications of the Study

The results derived from this study suggest immediate and long-range implications for school practices in the United States. Schools

which have educational commitments and objectives similar to those of British schools using informal educational approaches may find useful the description of characteristics identified here as important in the operation of one school viewed as successful in informal education. As they attempt to design informal educational programs that go beyond the simple incorporation of individual activities and practices, they will be able to assess what conditions already exist and what conditions need to be established for successful full-scale implementation.

This study has primarily yielded a descriptive narrative of how one school operates successfully in informal education. Its first-level interpretation of a particular reality, to use Smith's (1979, pp. 349-350) categorization, needs to be augmented by further attempts at theory building based on data drawn from both this setting and corroborated in others. Any evolving theory of instruction for informal education would also require substantiation through analysis of American experiences with the model.

In addition, because the model is innovative in nature, notions about how change is effected will also need to be addressed. Long-range implications of this research will therefore relate to efforts at developing programs of informal education endemic to the American setting and supporting traditional American objectives and values. The results of this study suggest a model for implementing informal education in a variety of environments. The use of change theories to facilitate the process of incorporating practices into existing programs will thereby add another dimension to a model of informal education which has a high probability of success.

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